



CH'AN

NEWSLETTER

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MISCONCEPTIONS IN BUDDHISM

(Talk given by guest lecturer Prof. Li Heng-yueh
Sunday, January 17, 1987)

I'm only a householder Buddhist. I simply want to talk about some common misconceptions about liberation or seeing your own nature that arise in the practice of Buddhism.

Some may think that achieving realization is difficult, but there are worldly pursuits that are more difficult. Mastering boxing or studying for a doctorate require great effort. By comparison seeing your own nature is quite simple. There are some tricks involved; the proper touch is needed. Without a proper understanding of what is involved, you can practice an entire lifetime and get nowhere. Most people make mistakes because all of their experience comes from worldly pursuits, and these are difficult. If you take the same approach to Dharma as you do to things of the world, you will not succeed, because an entirely different approach is needed. It is the role of a Ch'an master to help a practitioner discard his worldly understanding.

There is a Ch'an expression, "the gate with no door." Some might think this refers to the difficulty of practice: enlightenment on one side of the gate, delusion on the other -- how can you get from one side to the other? Worldly logic doesn't work. Enlightenment is a change of mind. When this happens, the gate disappears. You do not go over to the other side, but rather you find that the other side, enlightenment, is right where you are, where you've always been.

Another common expression is often misunderstood: "at the end of a one hundred foot pole, you take another step." If you take one more step beyond the length of the pole, you may fall and die. There is nothing extraordinary about taking the hundredth step, but that extra step is like finally letting go after practicing long and hard. You let go of routine, logical, worldly habits, and your mind changes.

Buddhism speaks of three learnings: precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. Learning precepts and samadhi are gradual practices; they are similar to worldly studies, and they require training and control. Wisdom is very different: it manifests in instant realization. Nothing in the world transforms so quickly. Only wisdom, because it is instantaneous, transcends the world. Samadhi and supernormal powers can be developed instantaneously, but if you believe you can attain wisdom gradually, then you're on the wrong path. Therefore, the Ch'an sect emphasizes the instantaneous aspect of wisdom.

The sutras often speak of people who heard the Buddha talk, and right then and there attained, "the purity of the Dharma Eye," which is to say they then had the Right View of certain things. Those at higher stages might attain the realization of the uncreate, non-perishing Dharma. Hearing the word, they attained realization in the same moment.

You might feel that you should have attained this realization long ago. We listen to the Dharma a great deal, we practice long and hard, and still we seem to attain nothing. It seems like the most unreasonable thing in the world. But it is not a worldly Dharma; it transcends the world and leaves reason behind.

There was once a monk who hit a rock while he was hammering. He was instantly enlightened. There are many such examples of people who became enlightened while doing things seemingly unrelated to practice. This happened not only in the Buddha's time, but thereafter as well.

So you can see that a proper understanding of the path is essential for practice. Thus I will talk about four erroneous views commonly held by many Buddhists that impede the understanding of the true nature of wisdom and enlightenment.

1. Mistaking the experience of samadhi for enlightenment.

Samadhi can be understood on a physiological level as a state where there is less than the normal amount of blood in the brain. This is a very delicate balance. Too little blood, and you'll fall asleep; too much and you'll have wandering thoughts. It is really a very subtle space, which we all may pass through in a given day. But it is such a narrow space, it may pass unnoticed. Within this narrow space, we can even further subdivide samadhi into nine levels.

In such states you may have visions, illusions, or some degree of supernormal powers. Most people have no control over such experiences; those that do actually have supernormal powers. All of these things, illusions or true powers, come from the unconscious. They have that common ground. Someone in this state may see a deity, or feel that they have attained Buddhahood and all of the inherent characteristics of a Buddha.

But when the level of blood in the head rises, or when you come out of samadhi, or simply wake up, all of these things disappear. You are still your old self: you hurt if you're hit, feel glad at good fortune, feel upset when criticized.

Wisdom is very different. You have a sense of direction, and this stays with you. You're like gold ore that has been refined into pure gold. You never return to gold ore again. When you first attain such wisdom, you are still very far from the attainment of an Arhat, but you do have some insight into your true nature. Essentially, you have the nature of a Buddha at this moment, but old habits still remain. This is true even for an Arhat. An analogy of the difference between the first taste of wisdom and the wisdom of a Buddha is this: the Buddha's wisdom is like an ocean from which we never drink. But when we do finally take our first sip, we taste exactly the same water the Buddha tastes. We only have a taste; the Buddha has the whole ocean.

2. Mistaking internal self-realization with one's external activities.

Realization is something internal; it is a state of non-attachment in the mind. The mind has changed; it is no longer what it once was. But you still have to live in the world - this entails following the precepts and cultivating the six paramitas, or perfections. You must still practice the Bodhisattva path, and thus you must cultivate compassion and help others. This attachment must still be present. Your internal state must not change your basic commitment to the world.

Some who believe that they have reached enlightenment, feel that they are at one with Dharma, and that therefore everything is empty and has no intrinsic nature. With such a view you could chop someone into pieces as easily as you could slice vegetables. You might justify this by saying that one who is enlightened is not bound by karma or causes and conditions. But this is wrong; such views and practices are contrary to the Bodhisattva path. There will indeed be consequences to your actions.

The opposite attitude to complete detachment, complete altruism, is also ill advised. If you spend all of your time helping others to the point where you neglect yourself, you will neither be able to eat or sleep. An enlightened person takes care of his daily life and still retains enough energy to practice the Bodhisattva path.

Thus an enlightened person should neither be too detached nor too attached to worldly pursuits. That is the reason why the Bodhisattva retains some of his delusions. These delusions will cause him to be reborn, and thus he will continue to pursue the Bodhisattva path. Thus a Bodhisattva must maintain a balance between internal and external attitude. He must not be outwardly kind and inwardly selfish, nor must he be outwardly detached and inwardly overburdened by the world.

3. Overemphasis on samadhi and supernormal powers.

Many people are curious about these powers, and they do indeed enhance your practice and give you a feeling of security and a hopeful attitude toward the future. Nevertheless, overemphasis on powers can lead you astray. It is genuine wisdom that you should go after, and the glitter of supernormal abilities should not make you neglect the pursuit of wisdom.

4. Misunderstanding the nature of Buddhahood.

Many Buddhists who already realize that all worldly dharma arises and perishes and is ever changing, wrongly believe that the Dharma Body, the supreme essence of Buddha, has a subtle existence in a some other world, different from the one we live in. Those who believe in this say they can give up this world, but they must not lose the Dharma Body. This is not the proper understanding. There is nothing from which the Buddha is separate. Whether it is this world or another world, there is nothing that is not the Dharma Body.

For one who is enlightened, everything is part of Buddhahood. For one who is not enlightened, every phenomenon is the consequence of cause and condition. We live in the same world as the Buddha, but he experiences the world very differently from the way we do. If you are not enlightened, it is very difficult to imagine what this experience is. It would be like someone in Taiwan who has never been to America, trying to imagine what America is really like. You may guess, but you don't truly know.

***** NEWS ITEMS *****

Professor Li also gave lectures at the Center on February 15 and March 15.

The Chinese New Year was celebrated at the Center. One hundred seventy people attended.

Shih-fu writes to wish everybody a healthy, wealthy, smooth and progressive New Year.

January 10 - 12. Shih-fu gave Dharma lectures to over five hundred people.

January 20 - 27. Shih-fu conducted a Ch'an retreat with sixty-five participants.

In February Shih-fu started to teach at two universities in Taiwan. He gives a Dharma talk Sundays and Wednesdays.

Schedule of Events:

In addition to the Tuesday evening meditation, Thursday night has been added to the program.

April 11. Beginner's meditation class. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. \$40.

Please call the Center to sign up. (718) 592-6593.

April 25. An intermediate meditation class will be offered.

May 10. Buddha's Birthday Celebration.

May 22 - 29. First retreat after Shih-fu's arrival. Members, \$60; Non-members; \$120.

For all those interested in the Wednesday Special class, please register. It is now open to anyone who is a member, or anyone who has attended beginner's class, or has some knowledge of meditation.

On Sunday April 12th to the 19th, Shih-fu will be giving a retreat in Bel Harbor, Maine. The cost is \$100. For further information and to sign up, please call Hugh Curran, 207 667-7170.

ALL ARE WELCOME

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